

A reflection on how gender-related concerns are taken up in public debate, slip from view, and almost-but-not-quite make it

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An event held at the houses of Parliament in February 2013 organised by the think-tank **Compass** to consider alternatives to the Government's budget policies – proved an interesting opportunity to consider how questions of gender travel around the policy domain. The event centred around the think-tank's report '**Plan B +1**' – a reflection on the Government's budget one year on.

One of the three speakers was a representative of the Women's Budget Group. The others – a Labour MP and an economist. This made for very interesting dynamics. Achieving institutional take-up of goals of gender equality undoubtedly comes with negotiations and compromises. This moves beyond a question of putting gender on the agenda. We need to be attentive to the opportunities for social justice that are opened or foreclosed when gender equality is framed in particular ways.

Three issues stood out for me, with which I engage in this post. These cover an issue that seems to be gaining strength on the political agenda, a consideration of how gender slips off the agenda, and a question that often struggles to be part of the agenda. These issues are:

- childcare
- the dangers of losing focus on gender due to funding concerns
- the importance of holding onto an intersectional understanding of identity

Childcare

While the think tank's report was free from references to gender, it did mention the need for government investment in good-quality childcare. This seems to reflect a shift in public discourse and policy towards attention to childcare. For instance, in recognising the high financial cost of childcare, the government has recently **announced plans to loosen restrictions on ratios of childcarer:child** in the paid sector and provide childcare vouchers to certain families. Beyond critiquing specific policies, what questions arise when we examine this rise in attention to childcare?

We need to be careful to avoid turning a focus on childcare into equating policies aimed at promoting gender equality with policies concerning childcare provision. Affordable childcare is surely a big need; but so is the provision of good-quality working conditions and remuneration for the providers of childcare. Hochschild points out that childcare providers often themselves rely on other market and unpaid forms of childcare to enable their participation in wage-earning [1], referring to this as a care-chain. We need to make sure that affordability at one end of the chain does not squeeze living standards further down the chain. Furthermore, gendered attention needs to be applied to a much wider scope of issues – stopping at childcare seems to equate women with a biological function that many neither want to nor can pursue.

While attention to engaging men into childcare is incredibly valuable and much-needed, we can't assume that the context of this will always be in terms of activity in the unpaid sector. **Cuxently**,

the vast majority of paid childcare is carried out by women. Indeed, despite changes in working patterns – both since the onset of the economic crisis and those that originated longer ago – men and women occupy different sectors of employment.

This graph is an illustration of this. ‘In the first column, the numbers in brackets are the ratios of women to men in these occupations. For example, 14.5 times more women than men work as “pre-primary teaching associate professionals”. In the second column the genders are reversed so that, for example, there are just over 80 men working as “miners, shot-firers, stone cutters and carvers” for each woman in this occupation’.

While increasing female access to male-dominated professions is crucial, so is attention to the barriers to male access to female-dominated professions. A focus on gender equality needs to bring into focus gendered disparities in how paid work is valued. For instance, while narratives of female propensity for caring have been used as an argument for low wages and low value of nursing [2], I have never noticed such arguments in relation to supposed male affinity for construction/engineering sectors.

Gender as a priority slipping due to funding

Among the conversations regarding the significance of gender, the author of the ‘Plan B+1’ report lamented that inadequate funding had led to the sparse attention to gender within his report. Indeed, it seems that a significant portion of attention to gender in the national and international scale in recent times can be attributed to presentations of gender equality as instrumentally valuable for other, more economically-focussed goals. Perhaps most prominently, the World Bank begins its **2012 World Development Report** with the assertion that ‘gender equality is a core development objective in its own right. It is also smart economics’. This does present a powerful tool for engaging actors for whom notions of ‘social justice’ and ‘equality’ on their own may prove neither convincing nor relevant.

However, in advancing the ‘business case’ for gender, we need to be ready to counter the tendency to let issues of gender equality slip from the agenda when funds/resources are tight. The road to gender equality is undoubtedly fulfilling and empowering; but it is also frustrating and painful as familiar social norms shift and entrenched privileges are eroded [3].

We need to find ways to keep the focus even when the benefits are not directly felt and cannot be captured in an economic model.

Intersectionality

Without discounting the significance of gender in mediating inequality, we can’t let other markers of inequality slip from view. Crenshaw shows us the material consequences of failing to take intersectional conception of identity into account [4].

She explores how black female plaintiffs were unable to successfully challenge discrimination because the courts employed an analytical framework that could not comprehend discrimination that is experienced through the intersection of gendered and raced aspects of one’s identity. Crucially, we can’t view this as ‘double’ discrimination arising from some kind of equation as the sum of racism+sexism. Rather, it is a particularly-situated experience arising from the significance of multiple axes of sociohistoric identity markers. Women from all classes, ages and bodily ability live lives structured by gender, as do men from all classes, ages and bodily ability. Countering inequality that directly affects only a particularly-situated and elite group, such as equal boardroom representation, is vital. Nonetheless, we need to find ways to talk about different structures of inequality simultaneously.

For instance, coming back to policies of childcare, it has been noted that the government’s latest **plans to offer £1,200 childcare vouchers** to families with incomes between the expected £10,000 tax threshold and £150,000 glosses over the class-based discrepancies in childcare **provision**

within these categories. That is, offering support to care-givers may leave untouched and even exacerbate further social inequalities if the distinct ramifications of policy for specifically-positioned social groups is ignored. However, class is only one axis structuring our identity. We can, and should, stretch this idea to encapsulate the widest breadth of categories that is possible through our attentiveness and imagination.

Appearance of gender equality concerns in the policy domain is an achievement that has been hard-fought. This brings with it opportunities and challenges in terms of issues that are enjoying relatively high prominence in public debates; questions of how to maintain a focus on gender equality; and questions of how to remain attentive to diverse markers of inequality.

¹ Hochschild, A. (2000) 'Global care chains and emotional surplus value' in W. Hutton and A. Giddens (eds), *On the Edge*, Jonathan Cape, pp. 130-146

² For an discussion, see Adams, Valerie and Nelson, J. (2009) *The Economics of Nursing: Articulating Care*, *Feminist Economics*, 15 (4):3 — 29.

³ For a discussion of male and female emotional ties to social norms : Charles, N, and James, E., 2005, 'He earns the bread and butter and I earn the cream': job insecurity and the male breadwinner family in South Wales in *Work, Employment and Society* 19:481.

⁴ Crenshaw, Kimberlé (1989) "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics", *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. 1989: 139-67.

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